

Ashlie's Story

Part 1

Three years ago, I started at a new school, my third as a teacher. I left my previous school for a few reasons. Primarily, I was looking for a smaller, more tight-knit community and a shorter commute. As I mentioned before, I was still searching for the right fit. While I had some really positive experiences at my last school, I knew it wasn't the place where I wanted to grow long-term. I didn't know much about my new school beyond its location and the good vibes I got during the interview. I was hopeful. And then, a culture shock hit.

The veil of collaboration and innovation that had been promised in my interview quickly fell away, revealing a school culture that felt far more dysfunctional than I expected. Through informal conversations with staff, I began to uncover the deeper tensions running through the building. While no school is perfect, the weight of the dysfunction here felt different. Compliance seemed to be valued more than mastery. Instead of building community, leadership appeared more focused on controlling behavior. I was told it hadn't always been this way, but I struggled to find hope that things might change.

And so I spent my first two years demonstrating a lot of caution in everything I did. While I found I was able to be successful within the walls of my classroom, I recognized that much of what was happening outside of my classroom would make it difficult to sustain that success. I watched systems fail to support students and teachers, and in some cases, actively harm them. The worst part of this was not dealing with the impact of these systems, but watching them play out over and over again. Listening to others quietly share their concerns behind closed doors, but watching nothing change. And while some of my colleagues made moves to share their concerns to leadership, they were often met with defense or retaliation. In recognizing this pattern, I was given the following advice by more than one veteran teacher: just close your door and teach. And while I understand where this sentiment comes from, I could no longer imagine watching harm repeat itself over and over again in the name of not burning myself out. On top of that, I knew what I needed to professionally grow was not a closed door. I needed collaboration, connection, and community. Shutting my door may have protected my energy, but it would have kept me stuck.

Part 2

So in my fifth year of teaching, and third year at this school, I did something that was way outside of my comfort zone. I sent out an invitation to others to start a club. The purpose of the club was simple: let's step into each other's classroom, make observations, and talk about what we saw.

This was honestly a terrifying step for me. At that point, I could count on one hand how many times I'd formally talked about teaching and learning with my colleagues. Our staff and

department meetings were almost exclusively focused on discipline data and standardized test scores. It felt like every conversation was centered on what we were doing wrong, rather than recognizing what was going well. That focus created a competitive, blame-filled environment instead of one that brought us together as a staff. And while behaviors and low test scores were real concerns, an even bigger and more detrimental reality was just how isolating this building was, for both students and staff alike.

I also knew that inviting people to open their classrooms to others was no small request. In this culture, letting others into your room can feel risky. Observations here have often been tied to judgment, not growth. Many teachers still hesitate to invite others in, and understandably so. With that, I hoped for a few responses to my invitation, but I was met with several more teachers looking to do this work than I had anticipated. And thus, the Teacher Observation Club at my school was formed.

This group of teachers included early career teachers, teachers new to the building, teachers who had been in the profession for several years, and interestingly, teachers across four different departments. Each person brought a sense of wisdom and perspective that would end up adding such value to our conversations. And in our first meetings, something became very obvious. We all shared a desire to discuss teaching and learning, to focus on the positive things happening in our school, and to look towards how we could grow as professionals. For many of us, this was the first time we felt a real sense of belonging in our school.

This club completely reshaped how I understood teaching and learning at my school. Over the past year, I've had the opportunity to step into six different teachers' classrooms. In each room I saw something unique and powerful whether that was the genuine relationships my colleagues held with students, strong instructional practices, or an overall deep sense of care for doing good work. I was especially moved by the vulnerability it took for my colleagues to open their doors and share their practice. Additionally the conversations we had after each cycle of observations revealed a growing appreciation for one another, curiosity about how others were approaching the work, and a real sense of camaraderie. We were doing a hard job, with the same students, often fighting the same battles, and now, we weren't doing it alone.

Throughout the course of running this club, I've felt genuinely renewed in my belief that change is possible at this school. The community we've built in the Observation Club has been my first real glimpse of hope here. If a group of teachers from four different departments can come together to have open, thoughtful conversations about teaching and learning, then maybe it's possible to do more of this work across the building. And maybe if we focus on what we're doing well rather than only what's going wrong, real change can begin to happen.

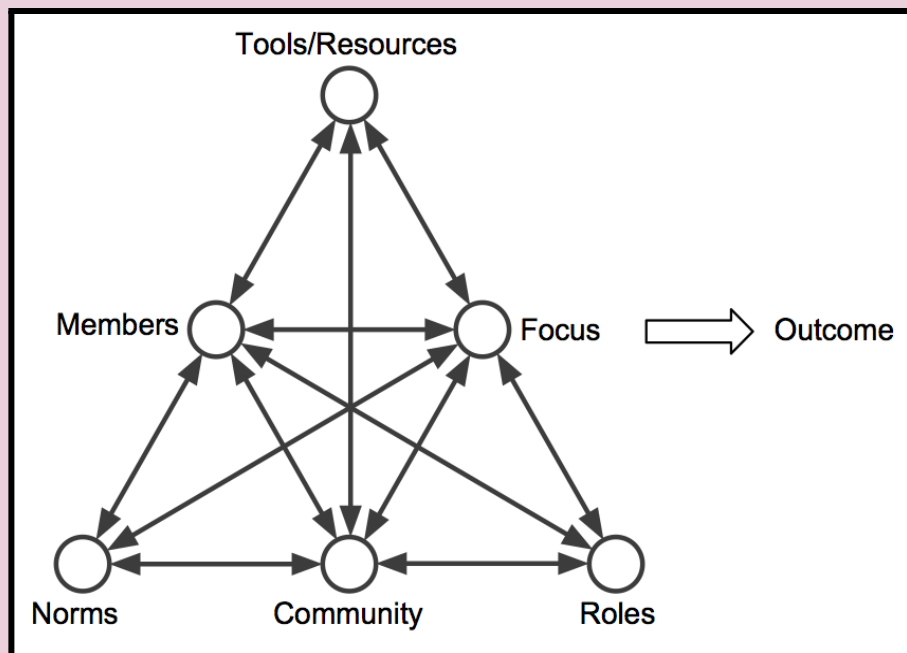
Since starting this club, I've started teaching with my door wide open, both literally and metaphorically. It feels like a quiet resistance to the advice I was given. I believe if we're going to make this school better, we can't do it alone behind closed doors. We have to be visible. We have to be vulnerable. We have to rebuild trust and community one conversation at a time.

The activity of teacher learning: unpacking Ashlie's story

Members	Who are the individuals in this activity?	
Community	What is the larger community in which this activity is situated?	
Focus	What is the goal of her work?	
Roles	What roles do members play?	
Norms	What are the norms that govern how they work together?	
Tools/ Resources	What do members use to accomplish this activity?	
Outcome	What is the outcome of this activity?	

Activity System Framework

“Every system is perfectly designed to achieve exactly the results it gets” - Don Berwick



Members

Describe

- Who is directly engaged in this work?
- Who am I in this system, and what responsibilities or expertise do I bring?
- Who are the other members, and how do we relate to one another?
- How are members' identities, experiences, and roles shaping participation?

Systems of Power & Professional Agency

- Who among us holds formal or informal authority or professional status? Who doesn't have a voice?
- Whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, and whose is discounted?

Interactions with Other Leverage Points

- **Member:** How do members experience tension between their espoused values and their actual participation or influence in this system?
- **Community:** How do members' identities and actions reflect or challenge the values and culture of the broader community?
- **Focus:** How do members' differing perspectives shape or complicate the shared focus of our work?
- **Roles:** How do members' expertise and identities influence the roles they are given or take up?
- **Norms:** How do members reinforce or push back against the group's explicit or implicit rules?
- **Tools/Resources:** How do members' differential access to tools/resources shape their participation and agency?

	● Outcomes: How do members' identities and positions influence the outcomes the system produces (e.g., whose success is prioritized)?
Community	<u>Describe</u> ● What larger community does this activity sit within (school, district, families, professional networks)? ● What values, expectations, and mandates does this community hold? About students and families? ● Who is impacted by the work but is not directly a member? (e.g., students, families, admin) ● Who are all the stakeholders in this work? <u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u> ● What are this community's beliefs about teacher value and agency? ● What systems of privilege or oppression are evident in this community? <u>Interactions with Other Leverage Points</u> ● Community: What contradictions exist between the community's expectations, values, and mandates? ● Members: How do community norms and expectations shape who becomes a member or how members participate? ● Focus: How do community priorities, expectations or norms support/constrain the focus of this system? ● Norms: How do community-wide rules and cultural expectations shape the norms of this group? ● Roles: How does the broader community's organization influence role assignments within the system? ● Tools/Resources: How does the community determine which tools are available or valued? ● Outcomes: How do system outcomes reinforce or challenge the community's values and power structures?
Focus	<u>Describe</u> ● What is the focus of our work - the problem, issue, or task that we're shaping? ● To what extent does each member understand and agree on the focus? ● Is the espoused goal what the group is actually working toward? Or is it something different? <u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u> ● To what extent are teacher voices included when the object is defined? ● Who sets the focus? Whose interests does the focus serve? <u>Interactions with Other Leverage Points</u> ● Focus: What competing foci (e.g., student learning vs. test scores) create friction in this system? ● Members: How do members' perspectives and goals shape the focus of the work? ● Community: How do community mandates or expectations influence what focus is prioritized? ● Tools/Resources: How do the tools available enable or limit the work that members are

	trying to do? ● Outcome: How do the current outcomes reflect or distort the original focus? ● Roles: How does the division of labor support or conflict with pursuing the focus? ● Norms: How do rules/norms align with or undermine progress toward the focus?
Roles	<u>Describe</u> ● What roles and responsibilities do members have, formally and informally? ● Who is responsible for what? Who has agency to do what? ● Who has the power or authority to make decisions, set agendas, or shape direction? ● Do members act in the roles they've been assigned (e.g., leader, facilitator), or differently? <u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u> ● Who is allowed to express professional knowledge and act on it? ● Whose knowledge is deemed legitimate or worthwhile? ● How are these roles influenced by larger systems of privilege and power? <u>Interactions with Other Leverage Points</u> ● Roles: Where do tensions emerge between formal role descriptions and the informal roles members actually take up? ● Members: How do members' identities and expertise shape the roles they are assigned or take on? ● Norms: How do rules and norms reinforce or challenge existing role structures? ● Outcome: How do the ways work is divided shape the results of the system? ● Focus: How well does the division of work align with the focus of the work? ● Community: How does the larger community's hierarchy influence internal roles? ● Tools/Resources: How do tools/resources shift or reinforce the distribution of work?
Norms	<u>Describe</u> ● What explicit and implicit rules guide how we work together? ● How are norms created, maintained, and challenged? ● What are we allowed to talk about? What are we not allowed to talk about (but may need to)? ● How are conflicts handled and decisions reached? <u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u> ● Who defines and enforces norms? Are norms equally applied to and taken up by all members of the system? ● Which cultural assumptions or systems of power are embedded in current norms? <u>Interactions with Other Leverage Points</u> ● Norms: Where do formal rules conflict with informal norms and how do members navigate which to follow? ● Members: How do members reinforce or push back against the rules? ● Community: How do broader cultural expectations shape the group's norms? ● Roles: How do norms justify or constrain the distribution of work and authority? ● Focus: How do norms align or conflict with progress towards the focus of the system? ● Tools/Resources: Which tools are considered acceptable or unacceptable because of norms?

	● Outcomes: How do norms directly shape the kinds of results this system produces?
Tools/ Resources	<u>Describe</u> ● What physical, intellectual, or digital tools and human resources do members use in the work? ● What do the tools communicate about expectations for students and teachers? ● What do our tools allow us to accomplish that we couldn't do otherwise? ● What tools or resources are missing that we need? <u>Professional Agency & Power</u> ● Who controls access to tools and resources? ● Do tools reflect inclusive, anti-oppressive practices or reinforce inequities? <u>Interactions with Other Leverage Points</u> ● Tools/Resources: How do tools/resources simultaneously enable and constrain the work? ● Focus: How do tools/resources support or constrain what members are trying to do? ● Outcome: How do tools/resources shape the results achieved? ● Members: How does unequal access to tools/resources affect participation and agency? ● Community: How does the larger community shape which tools are available or valued? ● Roles: How do tools reinforce or redistribute work in the system? ● Norms: How do group rules shape which and how tools are used?
Outcome	How might certain outcomes reproduce inequity or achieve greater equity for students and/or professionals in the system? <u>Describe</u> ● What outcomes are emerging from this system, whether intended or unintended? ● How do these outcomes compare with our vision for the system? <u>Professional Agency & Power</u> ● How might certain outcomes reproduce inequity or achieve greater equity for students and teachers? <u>Interactions with Other Leverage Points</u> ● Outcomes: What contradictions exist between intended outcomes and unintended outcomes, and how do these shape perceptions of success or failure? ● Focus: How do current outcomes reflect or distort the focus? ● Roles: How does the division of work shape equity or inequity in outcomes? ● Tools/Resources: How do the tools used determine the kind of outcomes produced? ● Members: How do members' identities and positions shape who the outcomes serve? ● Community: How do outcomes reinforce or challenge community values and power structures? ● Norms: How do group rules and norms influence the type of outcomes that are possible?

Ashlie's Story: Before and After in the Activity System Framework (ASF)

- This handout summarizes how Ashlie's story can be understood through the Activity Systems Framework (ASF). You can use this as a reference while analyzing interconnections between ASF leverage points.

Contradictions/Tensions in original system	Alignments/Agreements in the new system
Community ↔ Members: The school culture valued compliance and closed doors, while teachers needed openness and connection. Norms ↔ Focus: Observations tied to judgment clashed with Ashlie's goal of growth-oriented peer learning. Roles ↔ Community: Leadership positioned teachers as compliant implementers, while Ashlie stepped into a leadership role. Tools ↔ Norms: Classroom observation carried a legacy of mistrust, conflicting with norms of safety. Focus ↔ Outcomes: Focus on test scores and discipline produced outcomes of isolation and competition. Members ↔ Roles: Teachers wanted collaboration, but their assigned roles limited them to compliance and silence. Community ↔ Outcomes: Defensive, fear based outcomes reinforced dysfunction in the school culture.	Community ↔ Members: Within the Observation Club, members aligned around vulnerability, curiosity, and collaboration. Norms ↔ Focus: New club norms (trust, focus on strengths) supported professional learning. Roles ↔ Community: In the club, members took on fluid roles as observers and learners, reinforcing growth. Tools ↔ Norms: Peer observation was repurposed under new norms, making it safe and productive. Focus ↔ Outcomes: Focus on connection produced outcomes of camaraderie, hope, and agency. Members ↔ Roles: Members' diverse experiences enriched their new roles in the club. Community ↔ Outcomes: Outcomes of the club (belonging, hope) modeled a healthier community culture.

Step 1: Clarify the challenge and desired outcome

- What is one outcome in your school/department/team that you would like to see change?
- Why does this outcome matter to you and your students?
- What do you hope the system could produce instead?

Step 2: Describe your current system (ASF elements)

- Who are the members directly involved in this activity?
- What is the broader community in which this system is situated (school, district, policy context)?
- What is the stated focus/goal of this system, and how well do members share that understanding?
- What explicit and implicit roles do people play, and where is decision-making power located?
- What explicit and implicit norms shape how people interact?
- What tools/resources (protocols, data, curricula, meeting structures, relationships) are being used?
- What is the actual outcome of the system as it currently operates (and how does it differ from the intended focus)?

Step 3: Analyze tensions and interconnections

- Where do you notice contradictions between elements (e.g., goals vs. norms, roles vs. tools, community values vs. member needs)?
- Which of these tensions most impacts the outcome you want to change?
- How do power and identity show up in these dynamics?

Step 4: Identify leverage points for change

- Which element of the system feels most possible for you to influence (focus, tools, norms, roles, members, or community)?
- If you shifted that element, what ripple effects might it have across the rest of the system?
- What risks and opportunities do you anticipate in making this change?
- What is one concrete action you could take in the next month to begin moving this system toward your desired outcome?